

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BOGOTA 11712 162102Z
ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 PM-05 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 CIAE-00
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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5280
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 11712

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, MILI, CO
SUBJ: MATA LLAN CONTROVERSY AND ATTENDANT RUMORS DWINDLE

REF: BOGOTA 11393

1. SUMMARY. THE PUBLIC DEBATE OVER THE FORCED RETIREMENT OF JOINT STAFF CHIEF, GENERAL MATA LLANA (BOGOTA 11429) IS WINDING DOWN, TOGETHER WITH RUMORS OF MILITARY DISCONTENT, AUTOMATIC IN COLOMBIA FOLLOWING ANY CONTENTION REGARDING THE ARMED FORCES. IN CONTACTS WITH SENIOR COLOMBIAN OFFICERS, THE EMBASSY HAS GAINED NO IMPRESSION OF ANY SIGNIFICANT DISAFFECTION AMONG THE UPPER RANKS AS A RESULT OF MATA LLANA'S RETIREMENT. END SUMMARY.

2. TWO WEEKS AFTER THE FORCE RETIREMENT OF THE CHIEF OF THE JOINT STAFF, GENERAL MATA LLANA, THE PUBLIC CONTENTION OVER THE ISSUE IS SUBSIDING. AFTER SEVERAL DAYS LULL IN PRESS COMMENTARY, SEVERAL BOGOTA DAILIES ON DECEMBER 15 CARRIED THE TEXT OF AN OPEN LETTER DEPLORING MATA LLANA'S RETIREMENT. THE LETTER, SIGNED BY SOME SIXTY RETIRED OFFICERS INCLUDING FIVE GENERALS, STATED THAT THE SIGNERS PREFERRED TO BELIEVE THAT PRESIDENT LOPEZ HAD BEEN MISLED BY "HIS MOST IMMEDIATE MILITARY COLLABORATOR" (A REFERENCE TO DEFENSE MINISTER GENERAL VARON). THE LETTER, HOWEVER, HAS PRODUCED NO DISCERNABLE ECHO IN MEDIA OR PRIVATE COMMENT, PROBABLY IN PART DUE TO THE ABSENCE AMONG THE SIGNERS
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OF WELL KNOWN NAMES, SUCH AS RETIRED GENERALS RUIZ NOVOA AND VALENCIA TOVA. MATA LLANA HIMSELF HELPED TO COOL THE ATMOSPHERE IN AN EVEN-TEMPERED, ALMOST MILD, INTERVIEW PUBLISHED IN THE DECEMBER 14 ISSUE OF WIDELY READ WEEKLY MAGAZINE CROMOS.

3. RUMORS WHICH FOLLOWED THE RETIREMENT HAVE ALSO DECLINED. ONE COMMON STORY WAS THAT MATA LLANA AND FOUR OTHER LOWER RANKING

GENERALS, RETIRED AT THE SAME TIME, ARE LIBERALS AND THAT NINE GENERALS PROMOTED SUBSEQUENTLY ARE ALMOST ALL CONSERVATIVES. WE FIND NO BASIS FOR THIS RUMOR. COLOMBIAN MILITARY OFFICERS ARE CAREFUL TO AVOID IDENTIFICATION WITH ANY POLITICAL PARTY. ALSO, PRESIDENT LOPEZ HAS ALWAYS MAINTAINED A JEALOUS EYE ON THE POLITICAL STANCE OF THE ARMED FORCES AND IS NOT LIKELY TO HAVE APPROVED RETIREMENTS AND PROMOTIONS OF SUCH POLITICAL COLORATION.

4. TALES OF MILITARY DISCONTENT OVER THE MATAALLANA RETIREMENT, WHICH CUSTOMARILY ACCOMPANY ANY UNFORTHWARD EVENT IN THE MILITARY, HAVE BEEN AT A LOWER LEVEL THAN USUAL. IN CONTACTS WITH THE EMBASSY, SENIOR COLOMBIAN OFFICERS HAVE CONVEYED NO IMPRESSION OF SIGNIFICANT DISAFFECTION AMONG THE MILITARY AS A RESULT OF MATAALLANA'S RETIREMENT.
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